

SWAPAN NAYAK



Fancy cover designs of Tagore's books: a new face

Sangeet. The late Satyajit Ray always doubted whether RS could ever be standard mass consumption fare, because of its exalted philosophy, chiselled diction and the cultured nuances of its singing. Evidently, Ray could not foresee the great revival of the genre in recent years in both West Bengal and Bangladesh, with even commercial singers trying their luck with RS. However, whether cheaper books will do similar wonders for readers en masse remains to be seen.

The loss of copyright has saddened VB authorities. VB University vice-chancellor Dr Sujit Basu approached the PM, who is also chancellor of VBU, to intervene. But observers feel

Basu need not worry. "There is still plenty for the VB to do. It can play a pivotal role, by annotating Tagore's works over a period of time," says Sayantan Mitra, a university student. Again, VB can concentrate on releasing as yet-unpublished volumes of letters, manuscripts, prefaces, stories, novels, essays and paintings left behind by Tagore. One Tagore scholar estimates that 96 per cent of his letters remain unpublished!

Purists are more alarmed about the fate of Tagore's rich musical legacy. Ex-VB vice-chancellor Dr Dilip Sinha told *Outlook*: "There will certainly be some horrendous musical experimentation. Even when the copyright was in force, a young singer recently committed mayhem on a Tagore song and poem by rendering the former in a 'modern' format! Fortunately, his effort was dismissed as

a merely risible howler. But the VB Music Board itself has not conducted itself well either. Tagore had allowed some improvisation in renderings of his songs by Radhika Goswami and Sahana Devi." Veteran singer Suchitra Mitra defended the Board's control in 2001. She must brace herself for harder times—some youthful Bengali rock bands, all guitars and howls, have plans to "look at" some Tagore lyrics, to set them to "music".

Which would have pained Tagore no end. For all his tolerance, he also told maestro Pankaj Mullick, whom he allowed to set in tune the immortal *Diner sheshe* song: "Do not drive a steam roller over my music!" ■

Ashis K. Biswas

Copy Write, Unbound

Publishers scramble to cash in on Tagore's songs and lyrics

FOR once, no one, not even Nobel winner Amartya Sen, is predicting what will happen. In the new year, Viswa Bharati authorities have lost their sole copyright on literary works of and music composed by Rabindranath Tagore. Except for lip-smacking publishers who sniff a business opportunity, no one is cheering yet. Whether the unbridled proliferation of Tagore's literature and music will make a hundred flowers bloom, or turn into a recipe for disaster, is a question time alone can answer. And we are talking of big business—as many 25 publishers are in the race and the range of investment anywhere around Rs 5 crore. The debate has been fierce among pro-changers and no-changers. The balance, it seems, favours the pros slightly.

Viswa Bharati authorities are universally commended for jealously safeguarding the high quality and purity of Tagore's literature and music over the years. However, they did little to popularise the universal poet's message among the masses. The stodgy books produced by VB, with their bland cream-coloured covers year after year, made no concession to constantly evolving cover designs the world over. The young regard them as prescribed texts, urbanites dutifully stack them in book shelves, while rural folk ignore them. The prices of VB-produced books ranged from Rs 75 to Rs 300 (standard fare) and more for collected works.

This is where hoards of other publishers have stepped in, to help carry Tagore's mess-

age to the literate poor. One publisher has put together a Rs 20 lakh fund and will sell *Galpaguchchha* (short stories) at Rs 100, *Gitabitan* (songs) for Rs 90, *Sanchayita* (poems) for Rs 80, novels (in two volumes) for Rs 100 and *Gitanjali* for Rs 25 only! Another has invested Rs 3 lakh and will reproduce *Sanchayita*, *Gitabitan*, *Galpaguchchha* and *Vigyanchinta* (science-related essays). Punashcha has released six titles commercially and plans to bring out more.

Not all publishers, however, are joining the scramble. Ananda and Mitra & Ghosh, two of the biggest, are not rushing. Trade sources feel the move is dictated by market logic: "There was never a shortage of Tagore works, which probably means that there is little possibility of more sales, just because now more publishers will produce books already available. Also, maintaining quality is extremely important, as readers will compare the present rash of books with those of the VB," says a trade spokesman.

It may be very well for publishers to rush in where the VB refused to tread, but regardless of Tagore's timeless universality, how much of his thoughts or songs can be appreciated by commoners? The answer is surprisingly positive when it comes to Rabindra

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